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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

4 December 1967

MEMORANDUM FOR THE DIRECTOR

SUBJECT: Chinese and Soviet Reactions to the Likelihood  
of Communist Failure in South Vietnam

1. In this memorandum we assume that Hanoi anticipates failure of the Communist effort in South Vietnam because of the continued attrition of military and political capabilities. In such circumstances Hanoi might choose to terminate the war, with or without negotiations, or seek additional outside help. We examine below the likely Chinese and Soviet attitudes if this situation should develop.

China

2. Peking has a primary interest in the preservation of the Communist regime in North Vietnam. It also has a considerable stake in an outcome of the war in the South which would demonstrate the validity of "national liberation struggle"

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in Southeast Asia. The Chinese are prepared to exert considerable pressure on Hanoi and to increase military and economic assistance in order to sustain Hanoi's will and ability to prolong the war in the south. If requested, the Chinese would also be willing to station combat troops in North Vietnam to make additional Vietnamese available for infiltration to the South and to assist, if necessary, in preserving internal security.

3. Even so, Peking is not committed to a Communist success in South Vietnam at any price. The Chinese have allowed themselves room in their public position to accept the failure of the military effort in the South. If, in the end, the situation could only be saved through the use of Chinese ground combat troops against US forces, we feel that their fear of major hostilities with the US would be the commanding factor. Rather than accept this risk in these circumstances, and even in the unlikely event that Hanoi urged their direct intervention, we believe that Peking would accept a termination of the fighting. They would say that the setback was owing to deviations from Maoist doctrines and to Soviet perfidy.

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4. As an alternative to direct intervention in South Vietnam the Chinese might consider a diversionary effort in Laos. They might believe that a small addition of Chinese forces there would relieve pressures in South Vietnam and confront the US with the prospects of a much wider war. A small number of Chinese forces might be introduced into Laos clandestinely. From Peking's standpoint, however, an intervention in Laos, especially on a large scale, would incur the same risks of US counteraction as would Chinese intervention in South Vietnam. Thus, we think this move would be an unlikely one for the Chinese to try.

5. A direct US threat to the regime in North Vietnam, however, would be a different matter for Peking. We continue to estimate that Peking wishes to avoid a war with the US. If the US extended ground operations to North Vietnam, however, the Chinese reaction would depend on Peking's view of the extent and nature of the military threat to the Hanoi regime. If Peking judged that the threat to Hanoi was not critical, e.g., if it involved a US landing just north of the DMZ to outflank the NVA troops there, the initial Chinese military reaction would probably be limited to a rapid and conspicuous buildup of combat forces in South China and perhaps in the

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northern parts of North Vietnam as well. This action would be accompanied by strong verbal warnings. But when and if they thought it was necessary in order to preserve the Hanoi regime, the Chinese would be prepared to engage US forces in North Vietnam.

6. Any estimates concerning Chinese actions must be qualified because of the uncertain situation in Peking. We cannot be sure what the impact of the internal struggle has had or will have on Chinese policies. It is conceivable that under some circumstances a foreign war might appear to certain leaders or factions as a way out of a political impasse. It seems more likely, however, that the Chinese leadership would seek to avoid a major external crisis so long as internal affairs remain in disarray.

The USSR

7. The USSR's stake in the war in South Vietnam rests on different considerations <sup>from</sup> ~~than~~ those influencing Peking. The Soviets do not have a security interest of their own as do the Chinese in the area, but have been concerned primarily to preserve their claims to leadership of the Communist movement. At present the Soviet leaders probably think that a military

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victory by either side is not possible and probably prefer a political settlement to the uncertainties and risks of a protracted struggle. If Hanoi itself chose to seek such a settlement or to quietly liquidate the conflict we believe that Moscow would accept such action.

8. If Hanoi remained determined to fight on despite failing prospects and requested still more assistance, Moscow would probably feel compelled to respond. But the response would still be conditioned by Soviet concern to limit the risks of enlarging the war. Thus, Moscow might provide more sophisticated weapons for the defense of North Vietnam and non-nuclear weapons with additional range and fire power which would be employed against US forces and bases from positions north of the DMZ. Moscow might accompany these moves with a far tougher stand in all its relations with the US and generally create an atmosphere of tension designed to pressure the US into a more flexible posture in Vietnam. But we do not believe that the USSR, merely to prevent a Communist defeat in South Vietnam, would be willing to become involved directly in the fighting or to encourage high risk diversions in Korea, Berlin, or elsewhere.

FOR THE BOARD OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES:

SHERMAN KENT  
Chairman

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4a. While Peking in our view could accept Communist failure in South Vietnam, it almost certainly could not accept a collapse of Communist government in Hanoi. In the unlikely event that an unfavorable course of the war in the South combined with internal divisions in the North to present such a prospect, the Chinese would probably move into North Vietnam with combat troops to restore political order. Chinese troops might meet some resistance but they probably could reconstitute a central Vietnamese authority in Hanoi and restore order in much of the country. However, the puppet nature of the new regime would detract from its nationalist appeal and it probably would not be able to rally positive support either in the North or the South.

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5a. The Chinese would also be prepared to send combat forces into North Vietnam in the unlikely event that a combination of US military pressure and internal divisions should bring about a political collapse of the Hanoi regime. In view of the importance Peking attaches to preserving a friendly regime in North Vietnam, the Chinese probably would move into North Vietnam to restore political order and perhaps establish a puppet government to control a buffer zone along the Chinese frontier. In private talks with foreign officials in the summer of 1965, Chinese leaders implied that they might follow such a course under these circumstances.

5b. Moscow's response probably would be determined by its concern that only the Chinese would be in a position to exploit a political collapse of the Hanoi regime. The Soviets could do nothing to restrain the Chinese from intervening unilaterally in such a contingency. If, therefore, Moscow should become convinced that a collapse in Hanoi was imminent, the Soviets would make strenuous diplomatic efforts to halt US military operations in North Vietnam by proposing immediate negotiations, possibly at the summit level, to arrange a cease-fire and to discuss a political settlement. Because of the grave threat that a collapse in Hanoi would pose to the USSR's position and interests in the Communist world, the Soviets probably would be ready to accept the risks of taking such diplomatic initiatives without Hanoi's knowledge or consent.